

Message Text

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ACTION NODS-00

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 24497

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DEPT PASS INTERESTED ADDRESSEES

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: FR, SY, LE
SUBJECT: FRANCOIS-PONCET'S VISIT TO SYRIA: LEBANON
ASPECTS

1. SUMMARY: ELYSEE SECRETARY GENERAL FRANCOIS-PONCET'S STAFF HAS PROVIDED US AN ACCOUNT OF HIS TALKS WITH ASSAD AND KHADDAM AUGUST 1. SEPTTEL DESCRIBES ARAB/ ISRAELI ASPECTS; THIS CABLE IS CONCERNED WITH LEBANON, WHICH APPARENTLY OCCUPIED MOST OF THE DISCUSSION TIME. FRANCOIS-PONCET CONCLUDED THAT THE SYRIANS ARE NOT LIKELY TO TRY A MASSIVE TEST OF FORCE IN LEBANON. THE FRENCH BELIEF IS THAT SYRIAN ACTIONS IN LEBANON WILL PROCEED ON BOTH POLITICAL AND MILITARY TRACKS. THE SYRIANS' USE OF FORCE, IN THE FRENCH VIEW, HAS AS ITS OBJECTIVE NOT TO DESTROY THE PHALANGE AND THE OTHER EXTREME CHRISTIAN GROUPS BUT TO ISOLATE THEM POLITICALLY FROM THE REST OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, AND TO MAKE THEM APPEAR AS OUTLAWS WHO HAVE SOLD OUT TO ISRAEL AND ARE REJECTED BY THE ARAB NATIONS. FRANCOIS-PONCET UNDERLINED TO ASSAD THAT THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT FEELS STRONGLY THAT A POLITICAL SOLUTION IS NECESSARY AND THAT SYRIA MUST NOT SEEK A
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VIOLENT SOLUTION EVEN IF PROVOKED. HE TOLD ASSAD THAT SYRIA MUST REMEMBER THE EXTREME SENSITIVITY IN THE WEST AND IN FRANCE TO THE FATE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN LEBANON. ON UNIFIL, ASSAD SAID CATEGORICALLY THAT THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR IT AND THAT IT MUST REMAIN IN LEBANON. END SUMMARY.

2. ASSAD BEGAN THE DISCUSSION BY LAUNCHING A VIOLENT DIATRIBE AGAINST CHAMOUN AND GEMAYEL, FOLLOWED BY A DEFENSE OF SYRIAN ACTIONS IN LEBANON. HE SAID THAT THE PRINCIPLES WHICH GUIDE SYRIA IN LEBANON ARE THE UNITY, THE INDEPENDENCE, AND THE INTEGRITY OF LEBANON. SYRIA IS NOT A DIRECT PARTICIPANT IN THE LEBANESE CONFLICT, ACCORDING TO ASSAD, AND HAS NO OTHER GOAL THAN TO CONSOLIDATE THE LEBANESE STATE AND TO DEFEND IT AGAINST MINORITIES SEEKING TO GAIN UNILATERAL ADVANTAGE. ASSAD RECALLED THAT THE SYRIANS HAD ORIGINALLY SENT THEIR TROOPS TO BEIRUT IN RESPONSE TO THE PLEAS OF THE CHRISTIANS. SARKIS HAD TOLD ASSAD THAT IN CHRISTIAN HOUSES, ASSAD'S PORTRAIT HUNG ALONGSIDE THAT OF THE VIRGIN MARY. ASSAD DESCRIBED THE CURRENT CONFLICT AS RADICALLY DIFFERENT FROM THE EARLIER ONE. IT IS NO LONGER A RELIGIOUS CONFLICT, BUT A SUBVERSIVE POLITICAL ENTERPRISE CONDUCTED BY A MINORITY THAT DOES NOT REPRESENT THE LEBANESE POPULATION OR EVEN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. ACCORDING TO ASSAD THE MAJORITY OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY CONDEMNS THE PHALANGE AND THE OTHERS AND APPROVES OF SARKIS AND THE SYRIANS.

3. ASSAD SAID THAT CHAMOUN AND GEMAYEL ARE HELPED BY ISRAEL AND BY IRAQI SUBSIDIES. THEIR IMMEDIATE GOAL, ACCORDING TO HASSAD, IS TO PREVENT THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE LEBANESE STATE AND ITS ARMY AND TO PREVENT THE

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LEBANESE ARMY FROM REOCCUPYING THE SOUTH. THEIR LONGER TERM GOAL IS TO DRIVE OUT THE ARAB FORCE, PROVOKE A PARTITION OF THE LEBANESE STATE, AND APPROPRIATE TO THEMSELVES CONTROL OVER A SMALL CHRISTIAN STATE. IT WAS IN PURSUIT OF THIS OBJECTIVE THAT THEY ATTACKED THE ARAB FORCE, WHICH HAD TO RESPOND. ASSAD EXPRESSED REGRET THAT WESTERN MEDIA GAVE A DISTORTED IMAGE OF THE SYRIAN ACTIONS. IN FACT, HE SAID, THE ONLY REASON SUCH CIVILIAN TARGETS AS SCHOOLS AND HOSPITALS HAD BEEN TARGETTED WAS BECAUSE THE CHRISTIANS HAD TURNED THEM INTO MILITARY STRONGPOINTS. ASSAD ALSO LAID GREAT EMPHASIS ON THE FINANCIAL BURDEN BEING CARRIED BY THE

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 02 OF 02 PARIS 24497

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SYRIANS. HE SAID THAT FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM THE OTHER ARAB COUNTRIES AMOUNTED TO ONLY \$60 MILLION TWICE A YEAR.

4. ASSAD SPOKE OF THE POSSIBLE WITHDRAWAL OF SYRIAN FORCES FROM LEBANON. FRANCOIS-PONCET DID NOT BELIEVE THIS WAS A SERIOUS THREAT, THINKING RATHER THAT ASSAD HAS EVERY INTENTION OF KEEPING SYRIAN TROOPS IN LEBANON. INDEED, ASSAD SAID THAT THE MAINTENANCE OF SYRIAN TROOPS WAS DESIRED BY THE VAST MAJORITY OF LEBANESE. THEIR WITHDRAWAL WOULD QUICKLY LEAD TO CIVIL WAR AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY WOULD BE THE FIRST VICTIM.

5. FRANCOIS-PONCET WAS STRUCK TO HEAR ASSAD SPEAK OF THE ARAB FORCE NOT AS A FOREIGN FORCE BUT AS A SECULAR ARM OF LEBANON LEGALITY. ACCORDING TO ASSAD, THE ADF IS UNDER SARKIS AND IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SUPPORT SARKIS AND CRITICIZE THE FORCE AT THE SAME TIME. FRANCOIS-PONCET WONDERED WHETHER THIS LINE OF ARGUMENT WAS NOT INTENDED AT SOME FUTURE TIME TO JUSTIFY A SYRIAN DECISION TO DESTROY CHRISTIAN RESISTANCE.

6. FRANCOIS-PONCET UNDERLINED TO ASSAD THAT THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT STRONGLY SUPPORTS A POLITICAL SOLUTION. VIOLENCE IS A TRAP INTO WHICH SYRIA SHOULD NOT FALL, CONFIDENTIAL

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EVEN IF ITS TROOPS ARE PROVOKED. SYRIA MUST BEAR IN MIND THE SENSITIVITY OF WESTERN AND FRENCH OPINION TO THE FATE OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN LEBANON, FRANCOIS PONCET STRESSED.

7. FRANCOIS-PONCET'S CONCLUSION WAS THAT ASSAD WOULD PROBABLY NOT RESORT TO A FINAL TEST OF FORCE. ASSAD

SEEMED TO FRANCOIS-PONCET CONSCIOUS OF THE RESTRAINTS
IMPOSED ON THE SYRIANS IN LEBANON. FRANCOIS-PONCET
THEREFORE CONCLUDED THAT SYRIAN ACTIONS IN LEBANON WOULD
PROBABLY CONTINUE ON POLITICAL AND MILITARY TRACKS.
SYRIAN FORCE WOULD BE USED NOT TO DESTROY THE PHALANGE
AND THE OTHER EXTREME CHRISTIANS BUT TO ISOLATE THEM
POLITICALLY FROM THE REST OF THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY,
MAKING THEM APPEAR OUTLAWS WHO HAD SOLD OUT TO ISRAEL
AND WHO WERE REJECTED BY OTHER ARAB NATIONS.

8. FRANCOIS-PONCET ASKED ASSAD WHAT HIS POSITION WAS
WITH REGARD TO RENEWAL OF THE UNIFIL MANDATE IN SEPTEMBER.
ASSAD SAID CLEARLY THAT THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE
FOR UNIFIL AND IT IS THEREFORE NECESSARY TO KEEP IT IN
LEBANON.
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